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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS ON
PROTESTANTISM: MUCH PROGRESS, MORE TO BE DONE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Vietnam's point person on religion underscored progress in improving religious freedom, but also admitted that there is still work to be done. Vietnam plans to recognize a number of additional religious groups, including the Baha'i Faith while Protestant congregations in the Central Highlands have enjoyed significant progress over the last year with over 1,000 new meeting places registered. In his July 24 meeting with the acting head of the Committee on Religious Affairs, the Ambassador pressed for quicker GVN registration of Protestant congregations in the northwest, GVN assistance in obtaining permission for churches to train religious workers, and speedy publication of a H'mong-language Bible to meet the needs of the numerous H'Mong Protestants. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador met with Nguyen The Doanh, Vice Chairman of the GVN Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), on July 24. (Note: Doanh has been in charge of CRA since the retirement of Chairman Ngo Yen Thi in March 2007. End note.) The Ambassador noted the important work that has been done on religious freedom during his three years in Vietnam. When the Ambassador started his posting, Vietnam was on the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC). Vietnam is now off that list and the Ambassador said he was pleased at how well the two sides have worked to create the progress that led to this result. He underscored that there is still work to be done, as President Bush noted in his June meeting with President Nguyen Minh Triet in Washington.

Slow Pace of Church Registrations

¶3. (SBU) One year previously, the USG and the GVN had been engaged in discussions concerning the registration of house churches associated with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) in northern Vietnam, the Ambassador noted. At that time, there was considerable progress in the Central Highlands but registrations in the north and northwest of the nation were lagging. CRA Chairman Thi and others had explained to IRF Ambassador Hanford that they intended to facilitate registration of churches in the northwest as soon as possible. The ECVN put forward more than 530 applications before the GVN asked ECVN to stop, even though another 600 congregations had not yet applied. By the end of 2006, only some 30 were registered. Despite that low number, Vietnam was taken off the CPC list with the expectation that registrations would continue. So far, however, we understand that only 10 more have been registered.

¶4. (SBU) Doanh responded by noting that, while the ECVN claims there are 500 congregations to be registered, meeting places and

congregations are "relative concepts." The GVN has not discussed the definitional criteria with ECVN, but there must be a meeting place for religious services with someone properly trained (or at least literate) in charge. This need for clarification and setting agreed definitions was slowing to some degree the process of registration. The GVN will conduct at least four more training sessions for local officials and four at the commune level in the Central Highlands and Northwest Highlands in the coming months. The Ambassador urged the GVN to directly engage the ECVN so pending registrations can be resolved.

15. (SBU) Doanh noted that Protestant congregations under the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in the Central Highlands have enjoyed significant improvements as a result of the GVN helping local people and officials to understand the 2004 ordinance on religion. More than 1,000 congregations in the Central Highlands have been registered, and 200 additional unaffiliated meeting places have been registered with the help of local authorities.

16. (SBU) Doanh said that, by contrast, in the Northwest Highlands the topography, local customs and lack of awareness among officials and the broader society of the new policy regarding religion have slowed the progress of registration. Thus far, 45 meeting places have been registered in the northwest and the GVN hopes to register another 45 by the end of the year. Now almost all the provinces in the region have seen improvement with the exception of Son La Province, according to Doanh. The Ambassador said he would add Dien Bien Province as a problem area. He mentioned reports that Protestantism has been denounced there by some local authorities as, among other things, an "American" religion.

New Religious Groups Registered

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17. (SBU) Doanh said that, in addition to Vietnamese Protestantism's two main entities, the SECV and ECVN, five more Protestant entities have been registered and another five will soon be registered for a total of 10 new entities. While in total only six religions and 16 religious organizations have been recognized by the GVN, in the "near future" a total of ten religions and 20 organizations will be recognized in accordance with the ordinance, including the Baha'i Faith, the Vietnam Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Grace Baptist Church, the United World Mission Church, one faction of the Mennonite church, and two smaller Buddhist groups - the Tu An Hieu Nghia group and the Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice Association. (Note: Post will follow up seeking details. End note.)

GVN Support for Training of Clergy

18. (SBU) The Ambassador said for the ECVN to train its religious workers it needed permission for its workers to travel to Hanoi and to upgrade its facilities for a Bible school there. Doanh agreed training of clergy is also an important issue and said the GVN is doing its best to help meet the demand. He agreed the ECVN's facility in Hanoi is inadequate but said there is an issue of ownership of the facilities between ECVN and the Hanoi Protestant Church which must be resolved before the property can be improved. In addition, the Catholic Church has six seminaries in Vietnam and if the church would like to propose others the GVN is prepared to consider them. Space has also been given in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City for the construction of Buddhist training centers and to the SECV in the south to set up Bible schools.

H'mong Bible Publication Faces Technical Hurdles

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador noted the GVN had allowed the Bible to be published in several ethnic minority languages but permission had not been granted to ECVN to publish in the H'Mong language despite a need from more than 114,000 H'Mong Protestants. Doanh said the government does not wish to create obstacles for its publication in the H'mong language, but there are technical difficulties. The H'mong language has its own script, but there is now a new version of the language using the Latin alphabet and the H'mong Bible would use this alphabet. This new alphabet has not yet been accepted as legal by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), which has the lead on the issue.

¶10. (SBU) Doanh concluded that there have been significant improvements on religious freedom in Vietnam and more will follow. The Ambassador agreed that the meeting showed how important it is for the Embassy staff to remain in close contact with the CRA in order to keep abreast of developments.

¶11. (U) Comment: due to time constraints, the Ambassador could not raise a number of Catholic Church-related issues. He told Doanh that he would share those in a letter next week.

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